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Protesting chaplain prays in front of White House

By Kelly Kennedy
Times staff writer

About 20 people gathered in front of the White House Saturday morning, palms up and eyes closed, swaying and singing hymns.

Navy Chaplain (Lt.) Gordon Klingenschmitt, in Navy blues for the hour-and-a-half prayer service and broke a 19-day hunger strike he started in protest against the Navy..

Klingenschmitt, an evangelical Episcopal priest, began his water-only diet Dec. 20 because he said the Navy precluded him from praying in Jesus' name while in uniform, saying he would end his hunger strike when the "president gave me my uniform and let me pray in Jesus' name.

"Today is that day," he announced to the group, before breaking his fast with a communion wafer. "I have been granted the religious liberty today to pray in uniform."

Klingenschmitt said that permission came from a letter he received from Capt. William Crow of Naval Station Norfolk, Va.

But Navy officials said nothing had changed since the beginning of Klingenschmitt's fast.

"No one ever, ever told him he couldn't pray in uniform," Navy spokesman Lt. William Marks said.

The regulation states military chaplains may pray in public in uniform, but that doesn't include lobbying for a cause, Marks said. "It wasn't any one person's decision - it's just the regulation."

Klingenschmitt requested the letter after, he said, he was told he could not appear in uniform on news programs to promote his belief that the Navy is imposing on his right to say evangelical prayers in services meant for sailors of all faiths.

"The order did not direct that you 'may not wear [your] uniform in public if [you] talk about religion or if TV cameras may be present,'" Crow wrote in a letter dated Jan. 6, citing a letter from Klingenschmitt.

"Media appearances' ... meant interviews, press conferences, press availabilities, and similar events ... where you deliberately engage with the press



Navy Chaplain (Lt.) Gordon James Klingenschmitt prays "in Jesus name" in front of the White House wearing his uniform, which may be against military policy. — Rick Kozak / Military Times



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to express your personal views.”

Klingenschmitt said the 11 a.m. gathering Jan. 7, for which he sent out press releases to the media, did not constitute a “press conference.” He said in the press release that it was a “bona fide public worship service.”

After offering communion, Klingenschmitt took off his Navy uniform jacket in the middle of the sidewalk, exchanged it for a priest’s collar and then took questions from the media.

In his original complaint, Klingenschmitt said his contract wasn’t renewed with the Navy because his command disagreed with the way he conducted services.

Marks said Klingenschmitt was never disciplined for the way he conducted his services, and that his contract was not held up.

“In public events, which are not divine services, chaplains of all faiths are asked to pray in a manner that does not exclude others...” Marks said. “The key difference is that these events or ceremonies are command-sponsored or command-hosted, and are not of a religious nature, but may include religious elements such as invocations or benedictions.”

Marks said chaplains are asked to make sure their remarks are appropriate, and they are free to decline to speak. No disciplinary action has been taken against Klingenschmitt, Marks said, and the chaplain returned to Naval Station Norfolk Monday.

Klingenschmitt is free to counsel soldiers, but isn’t conducting sermons.

“We want to investigate all of his complaints,” Marks said. “We want to make sure everything was handled correctly.”

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